

## Olcott, Henry Steel

(1832-1907). First President and Co-Founder of the Theosophical Society (TS). Born August 2, 1832, at Orange, New Jersey, Olcott was the eldest of six children of Henry Wyckoff Olcott and Emily Steel. He studied at the College of the City of New York and at Columbia University until his father's business failed in 1851. Olcott then left college and moved near his father's brothers in Ohio, where he worked two years on a small farm for a share. These uncles encouraged his interest in occult phenomena, hypnotism, and mesmerism, and Olcott discovered he had some mesmeric ability.

Returning to New York to study scientific agriculture, Olcott won recognition for his work on the Model Farm of Scientific Agriculture at Newark, New Jersey. He co-founded a farm school near Mt. Vernon, New York, which pioneered the present system of US agricultural education based on the Swiss model. Acknowledged for his studies of sorgho and imphee, he wrote a well-received book on the subject (1858). He visited Europe on research and, as an expert in his field, became the agricultural correspondent for the New York Tribune and American correspondent of the Mark Lane Express. Incognito he succeeded in witnessing the hanging of abolitionist John Brown for the Tribune, Virginia authorities having forbidden any Northerner from witnessing the event.

In 1860 Olcott married Mary Epplee Morgan, and they had four children, the two youngest dying in infancy. With the coming of the Civil War, Olcott enlisted in the signal corps and went through the North Carolina campaign under General Burnside. After recovering from dysentery, he was made Special Commissioner of the War Department to investigate fraud, corruption, and graft at the New York Mustering and Disbursing Office. For four years he conducted investigations, often dangerous, of criminal activity, sending many violators to prison. His integrity, courage, and effectiveness caused him to be made a Colonel. He was then assigned to the Navy Department in Washington, DC, to investigate abuses in the Navy Yards. There he reformed the system of accounts and curtailed corruption. The Secretary of the Navy said of his efforts:

I have never met with a gentleman entrusted with important duties, of more capacity, rapidity, and reliability than have been exhibited by you throughout. More than all, I desire to bear testimony to your entire uprightness and integrity of character, . . .

When Lincoln was assassinated, Olcott was appointed to the three-man commission that investigated the murder.

After resigning his commission in 1865, Olcott returned to New York City to study law and was admitted to the New York Bar in 1868. A specialist in customs, revenue, and insurance cases, he had a successful practice. His marriage, however, had failed, and by 1874 he had granted his wife a divorce.

In July 1874, Olcott decided to resume his study of experimental psychology. Over the years he had studied anatomy, physiology, chemistry, and orthodox scientific views on the mind, and had "practically investigated the heterodox branches of phrenology, physiognomy, mesmerism and psychometry" (Theosophy, Religion and Occult Science, p. 121). Reading of spiritualistic phenomena at the Eddy Homestead in Chittenden, Vermont, he obtained an assignment from the New York Sun to investigate for himself. The articles caused a sensation, and on his return the New York Daily Graphic persuaded him to return for a longer period to continue his scientific investigations of the phenomena, and the resulting articles were republished across the United States. European and American investigators of phenomena praised his impeccable research methods. The articles were collected and published as *People from the Other World* in March 1875.

He later characterized his first meeting at the Eddy Homestead with Helena P. [BLAVATSKY](#) in October 1874 as "the most fortunate event of my life; for it made light shine in all the dark places, and sent me out on a mission to help to revive Aryan Occult science, which grows more absorbingly interesting every day" (op. cit., p. 245). He found her intellectually brilliant though eccentric, and they kept up their friendship in New York and Philadelphia.

For some time Olcott continued his well-publicized investigations into spiritualistic phenomena and various mediums. Meanwhile Blavatsky, as mediator, introduced him to advanced human beings who

became his teachers and whom he served to the end of his life. To Olcott these adepts furnished a tangible ideal of human perfectibility. On September 7, 1875, following a lecture in Blavatsky's room it was proposed that a Society be formed to investigate occult questions. The objective of this Theosophical Society was the "discovery of all the laws of Nature and the dissemination of the knowledge of the same." Olcott as President delivered the Inaugural Address on November 17, stressing that theosophists hold to no particular body of philosophy, but are students and investigators. On the role of the Society, he said: "To the Protestant and Catholic sectaries we have to show the pagan origin of many of their most sacred idols and most cherished dogmas; to the liberal minds in science, the profound scientific attainments of the ancient magi."

The next two years were a period of self-discipline and training for Olcott, who eventually dedicated himself fully to helping the cause of his and Blavatsky's teachers. He practiced law by day and helped Blavatsky with writing *Isis Unveiled* at night, when they were not entertaining the many visitors who came to see her. After a year had passed, the Theosophical Society had not grown and all administrative powers were placed in Olcott as President, who handled all its affairs and supported it from his own pocket. His own Master, [MORYA](#), visited him on one occasion, and Olcott said that "This visit and his conversation sent my heart at one leap around the globe, . . . to India, and from that moment I had a motive to live for, an end to strive after. That motive was to gain the Aryan wisdom; that end to work for its dissemination" (op. cit., pp. 123). In the three-year period before going to India, Olcott claimed to have met fifteen adepts of several nationalities.

A year after Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* was published in 1877, Olcott and Blavatsky left for India, which Olcott considered his spiritual homeland as the cradle land of religions and home of his Master. He received a special diplomatic passport to promote cultural and other exchange, hoping to support himself and Blavatsky through import/export ventures. Their first year was complicated by differences with Swami [DAYĀNANDA SARASWATĪ](#), with whose śrya Samśj the Theosophical Society briefly joined. The British government also had them trailed, thinking Blavatsky a possible Russian agent. Nonetheless, theosophical activities soon bore fruit, arresting the attention of the educated Indian population. Their financial situation remained tight, but after the first year the situation improved as the magazine Blavatsky founded and edited, *The Theosophist*, began showing a profit. They moved their headquarters from Bombay to Adyar, Madras, (now Chennai), India, in December 1882.

Olcott's chief theosophical endeavor was promoting universal brotherhood and the revival of the inner greatness of all religions. He believed in "conceding to the people of all creeds the right of enjoying their religious convictions unmolested," and felt the theosophist's duty was "to help them to discover and live up to the highest ideal that their respective religions contain" (op. cit., p. x). Therefore, the Society preached no dogmas or articles of faith. Two cardinal propositions that Olcott proposed were "That, psychically, all men are brothers, all equally entitled to know divine truth, and, without distinction of nationality or faith, should join for the general good of humanity; bound by a common tie and common sympathies"; and second, "that every human being has within his own nature, in a greater or less degree, certain sublime faculties which, when fully developed, will give him divine knowledge" (op. cit., pp. 182-3). Olcott believed that theosophy is the common basis of all religions, and religion rested on "the verification in individual human consciousness of metaphysical and transcendental truth" (op. cit., p. 26). He sought to show that occultism and spirituality were truly scientific, while materialism was not. "Theosophy derives its divine knowledge from direct intuition and contemplation . . . every original founder of a religion was a seeker after divine wisdom by the theosophic process of self-illumination . . . while living in and being a factor in the outer world, the Theosophist must be able to look into, enter, act in, and return from, the inner world, fraught with divine truth" (op. cit., pp. 246-7). He believed that to maintain its moral sense, society needed constant refreshment from such individual spiritual research and personal illumination. The Society's role was to encourage this research by members of all faiths.

Olcott's beliefs determined the nature of his work. In his many public lectures on theosophy, his object was nothing more than a popular presentation of elementary facts. . . . "There are metaphysicians enough to enlighten, and confuse, the higher reading public; but to one who can follow them through their demonstrations there are fifty who lack time, ability, or both. This, primarily, is my public; and I shall be delighted to be the means of awakening in some of these the desire for profounder study of problems so absorbing" (op. cit., p. xi).

In his first Indian lecture Olcott announced that the Society's objectives in India were to encourage native scholars to translate their religious and scientific literatures into English to circulate in the West, to promote nonsectarian education for Indian girls and married women, "which we regard as the corner stone of national greatness," and to introduce cheap, simple, hand-worked machines to increase the population's comfort and prosperity (The Theosophical Society and Its Aims, Bombay, March 23, 1879). It sought "to give Anglo-Indians a greater respect for the subject nation they rule over" and aid in "kindling in the bosoms of Indian youths a due reverence for their glorious ancestry, and a desire to imitate them in their noble achievements in science and philosophy" (Op. cit, p. 245).

Olcott traveled thousands of miles lecturing and working for the spiritual regeneration of his adopted country. Before arriving, he had pictured "A Hindu nation homogeneous, at least, as regards spirituality and love of their ancestors — one great family, . . ." (op. cit., pp. 125-6). However, he found poverty, ignorance, disease, a fascination with Western material prosperity and science, and "idolatrous lethargy and fatalism" (idem.). He sought to counteract the materialism of Western education and science through a revival of the Indian spiritual heritage and a more general understanding of the inner meaning of the Vedas and their values. He asked Hindu pundits' aid in reviving Hinduism, if only by compiling tracts and catechisms. Olcott emphasized the importance to India of developing in a characteristically Indian way, rather than aping Western culture and intellectual life and embracing uncritically European ideas of progress.

Olcott is perhaps most widely associated with the revival of [BUDDHISM](#), particularly in Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon). This particular work, next to the theosophic effort, was certainly closest to his heart. Arriving in Sri Lanka in 1880, Blavatsky and Olcott officially became Buddhists. They found difficulties caused both by foreign conquerors and by the Buddhist population. Olcott sought to increase the Buddhists' knowledge of their own religion and "to show them how to separate true Buddhism from devil worship and nature worship and superstition of various kinds" (Theosophical Sifts, Theosophical Publishing Society, London, 4:6). To this end in 1881 he wrote his Buddhist Catechism, which has been translated into many languages. The Founders formed Sinhalese branches of the Theosophical Society and helped promote national traditions, culture, languages, and religion. Buddhist schools were established as well as the Sinhalese newspaper Sarasavisandaresa and the English-language The Buddhist. Olcott traveled over the island curing people and raising subscriptions for the schools. He represented the Sinhalese to the English government in 1884 in London, and succeeded in having some of the most oppressive policies lifted.

Olcott later made successful visits to Burma and Japan, encouraging respect and enthusiasm for Buddhism and admonishing the clergy to look for the ancient truths behind orthodoxies and to set the example in spiritual behavior. Olcott felt strongly that the ability to agree on basic doctrinal points was necessary if Buddhism were to have a significant impact on the West. To unify Buddhism, he wished the priesthood of various schools to accept 14 Fundamental Propositions of Buddhism which he had drawn up in consultation with Buddhist scholars. These points were accepted at a Buddhist conference at Adyar, India, in 1891.

Olcott sought to revive enthusiasm in other religious communities besides the Hindu and Buddhist, notably the Zoroastrian, and also Islamic, Jewish, and Christian, though having become a Buddhist he would not join any other religion.

In August 1882, while in Ceylon, Olcott began practicing mesmeric healing. He went on to cure thousands of people throughout India, many cases being well-documented. These healings focused attention on the Society, increased attendance at lectures, and gave credibility to his message. This practice, however, soon began to consume too much of his vitality, and he was forced to take measures to preserve his health. Slightly more than a year later, he discontinued mesmeric healings on orders from his teachers.

On lecture tours, beginning in 1882, Olcott formed boys' clubs and societies, and in 1884 he devised an Aryan League of Honor independent of the Theosophical Society for boys from 10 to 21 of the Hindu, Parsi, Buddhist, and Jain faiths. In December 1894 a Boys' Association uniting all these clubs was formed, with a Constitution and magazine which was published until December 1900.

In 1884 Blavatsky and Olcott traveled to Europe, partly to promote the cause of Sinhalese Buddhists to the British government. Olcott spoke at length with members of the Society for Psychical Research about Blavatsky's phenomena. Because he believed "the basis of philosophy is experimental psychology" (H. P. Blavatsky, "The Original Program of the Theosophical Society"), he had a great interest in the scientific investigation and demonstration of human powers. Looking back in 1891, Olcott said:

Now it has been remarked that this movement was floated on phenomena. To a certain extent that is true, but the fault probably is more with myself than with her. The things she did were so novel and striking to me, they were so interesting to me as a veteran student of psychology, they had such an important scientific bearing upon the problem of the powers of man and the latent forces of nature, that naturally I urged her to continual displays of these powers before a variety of witnesses. Reluctantly she complied, and the result was most unfortunate; it vindicated the wisdom of that reticence which had been the policy of all the great sages and adepts in the past. (Theosophical Siftings, 4:5)

While Olcott and Blavatsky were in Europe, trouble erupted in India. The Coulombs, a couple who worked at the Adyar headquarters, attacked Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society in an exposé in The Christian College Magazine, a missionary publication. They maintained that Blavatsky's phenomena were fraudulent and that she wrote the Mahātmās' letters herself. The evidence they provided for their claims has been shown in this century to be bogus, probably forged by M. Coulomb.

When Blavatsky and Olcott returned to Adyar in December, she insisted on a lawsuit to clear her name. Although perfectly aware of the untruth of the charges, the genuineness of Blavatsky's phenomena, and the existence of her (and his) teachers, Olcott was against this move both as a lawyer and because many of the Indian members disapproved of having the Mahātmās' names bandied about in court. He threatened to resign if Blavatsky did not abide by the decision of a Committee, made up largely of Hindu lawyers, at the upcoming Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky acquiesced with regret, and the Committee decided not to go to law. The strain caused her health to break down, and on her doctor's advice she left India for Europe in 1885, resigning as Corresponding Secretary until her name was cleared. The subsequent publication by the Society for Psychical Research of Richard Hodgson's negative Report of his investigations of Blavatsky further shook the Theosophical Society. She spent the remaining years of her life in Europe, particularly in England. There she completed and published The Secret Doctrine, wrote The Key to Theosophy and The Voice of the Silence, founded and edited Lucifer, and revitalized the European theosophical work.

After Blavatsky's departure, Olcott undertook a successful Indian lecture tour, defending the Society and attacking the Coulomb's charges. But after this time, as C. [JINARĀJADĀSA](#) remarked, Olcott "was greatly averse to speaking openly of the connection of the Masters with the Society. His whole policy was to dissociate the Society from Occultism, which he considered had brought dangerous elements" (The Theosophist, August 1932, p. 606). As early as 1881 Olcott said, "I have realized, too late, that the public who could so basely treat a woman who was but their disciple, could not understand anything that might be said about them. So, henceforth, I shall try to abstain from even speaking of them, except to such as are prepared and anxious for the truth" (op. cit., p. 196).

In 1886 the [ADYAR LIBRARY](#), one of the projects dearest to Olcott, was opened to promote the Second Object of the Society through collecting manuscripts useful for theosophic purposes. As he stated,

Its object is to help to revive Oriental literature; . . . to win the regard of educated men, especially that of the rising generation, for the sages of old, their teachings, their wisdom, their noble example; to assist, as far as may be, in bringing about a more intimate relation, a better mutual appreciation, between the literary workers of the two hemispheres. (Annual Report 1886)

He hoped that scholars could translate Oriental works so they would receive a wider audience. Subsequently the library greatly expanded and remained an important priority all his life.

Unfortunately, during the period around 1888, relations between Olcott and Blavatsky deteriorated over the years as his distrust of her grew, partly from conflicts and misunderstandings, and partly from a basic difference of approach. Olcott's strong point was organization and administration. To function effectively the Society needed to be an organized body, and to Olcott this organization and its success was the fulfilment of the Cause he had undertaken for his teacher. To him as President-Founder "Had been granted absolute and unlimited discretion as to the practical management" of the Society's affairs (Theosophist, September 1889, p. 706). The President, as he saw it, was someone who would administer his office with strict impartiality as between nations, sects and political systems. He must live at Adyar, develop the Library, keep up The Theosophist, push on the educational work, now so prosperous, in Ceylon and Southern India, and be ready to visit all parts of the world as occasion shall require, to weave the outlying Sections into the great golden web of brotherhood whose center and nucleus is at Adyar (Address at the Annual Convention, 1893).

He felt that the secret of the Society's growth lay in its Constitution and the simplicity of its aims: "Untainted by sectarianism, divested of all dogmatic offensiveness, they repel none who examine them impartially" ("TS Solidarity and Ideals," The Path, October 1894, p. 202). He sought to build up a federal league on the basis of the Three Declared Objects which, while giving all members and branches the greatest latitude of opinion and choice of work, should yet be a compact working entity, with the welding together of its units by the bond of a strong common tie of mutual interest and clearly defined corporate policy (Address at the Annual Convention, 1893).

In 1888, Blavatsky's response to this was to form announced the formation of an Esoteric Section of the Society in conjunction with William Q. [JUDGE](#) in America. Olcott took the view that in the proposed arrangement the most vital theosophical workers would be directly under Blavatsky rather than himself, leaving him as a figurehead as President. Such a Section also went against his grain because of its lack of inclusiveness and its giving out specific teachings as theosophical. He believed that the Society should be completely nonsectarian, endorsing absolutely no views of a religious nature. Olcott maintained that "We are not preaching a new religion, or founding a new sect, or a new school of philosophy or occult science" (op. cit, p. 145), and remarked in an 1893 letter to Judge that he believed the Esoteric Section and its various inner groups were dangerous because "the followers and sworn devotees of one school of religious thought and one teacher are but a sectarian group, in palpable conflict with the eclectic principles of the T.S" (The Theosophist, August 1893, p. 608).

Olcott went to Europe determined to quash the Esoteric Section, but received a letter on shipboard from Koot Hoomi warning him against his negative feelings about Blavatsky, and assuring him that she was the instrument of the Mah tmas, that no communication had been received in the West through any other source, and that with occult or esoteric matters she had "everything to do." Olcott was told that though the Masters still communicated with him directly, the fact that it was so infrequent was his own doing. On arriving in England he gave his blessing to the Esoteric Section, "to be organized on the original lines devised by the real founders of the T.S." (Lucifer, Oct. 1888).

In a letter, Judge objected to calling Adyar the spiritual heart of the theosophical movement, maintaining that the heart of the movement was wherever Blavatsky was, not in any specific geographic locale. In a reply in The Theosophist, Olcott disagreed, going over the various decisions in Conventions that caused the Headquarters to be, first, wherever the President-Founder was, and later established in 1885 permanently at Adyar, shortly after Blavatsky left for Europe. He went on to say:

Nor was Madame Blavatsky any more than myself the "Founder" of the Society: neither of us was anything more than a willing agent. . . . It was I who proposed the formation of the Society, who had all the early burden of guiding its infant steps, and who, after the collapse of the original legislative scheme of Rules and Bye-Laws, had . . . all the executive responsibility. . . . Yet she was the intermediary between them [the adepts] and me, thus earning my lifelong gratitude, as she long ago did by brotherly love and loyalty. . . . Like the active volcano, she throws out a good deal of lava, scorix and sulphur, but like it she often uncovers gold and silver veins of arcane truth for those who are not too blind to see it. (The Theosophist, September 1889, pp. 706-7)

On Blavatsky's death, Olcott continued as President-Founder, with Judge as Vice-President, and Judge and Annie [BESANT](#) as joint heads of the Esoteric Section, and heads respectively of the American and British Sections. In 1892 Besant wrote to Judge about some charges against Olcott, recommending that he as Vice-President ask Olcott to resign his office while the case was investigated. Judge did so, and Olcott offered his resignation, giving publicly as reason the current bad state of his health. After a few months Judge wrote Olcott that he had heard from the Master that Olcott was unjustly accused, and that he concluded that Olcott should not resign. Shortly thereafter, the American Section in Convention elected Judge their President, adding at Judge's instigation an appeal to Olcott to reconsider his resignation. The Indian Section also appealed to Olcott to reconsider his resignation but said it would go along with the European and American Sections. The European Section elected Judge President for Life but, because of their interpretation of a letter of Olcott's to officials, would not ask Olcott to reconsider. As Olcott had heard from his teacher that it was not time for him to resign, in a few months he withdrew his resignation. This affair created confusion and exacerbated misunderstandings between Olcott and Judge, whose very different personalities often grated on each other.

In 1892 Olcott began publishing his reminiscences in *The Theosophist*, later issued in six volumes as *Old Diary Leaves*. Because written from memory, based on his diaries, these volumes are not always entirely accurate, but they give his view of events and persons and form a most valuable source of early theosophical history. In 1894 Olcott began an educational program to help untouchables living near Adyar. He opened "The Olcott Free School" to give these people opportunity for an elementary education. Four other schools were opened between 1898 and 1906. Financial considerations caused three of the schools to be given to the City of Madras in 1925.

In 1895 another crisis rocked the Theosophical Society. Besant and Olcott made several accusations against Judge centering on alleged misuse of the Mahatmas' signatures. Olcott asked him to resign as Vice-President pending investigation, but Judge refused and went to London for the proposed investigation. The committee of investigation was declared unqualified under the Society's Constitution to conduct such an investigation and was disbanded. Charges were dropped and all parties shook hands and agreed to move ahead. However, an official of the Society who did not wish matters to drop, W. A. Old, resigned and then published in a British magazine all the papers relating to the Judge case, which he had copied while serving as Recording Secretary of the Theosophical Society. The case was resumed by Besant with renewed energy, and the American Section in their 1895 Convention finally declared itself autonomous from Adyar. Olcott then canceled the membership of those following Judge in America and other Sections, and withdrew the Charters from all Branches supporting Judge. The Society had split. Shortly before he died, Olcott told an old friend that he felt he had wronged Judge, and regretted it (*The Word*, October 1915, p. 10). In the 1920s Besant, also, in an interview with Bahmanji P. [WADIA](#), admitted privately that she believed Judge innocent of the charges.

After the Society split, Olcott continued working for the Theosophical Society with Besant, who was head of the Esoteric Section. He worked untiringly for the brotherhood of all humanity and for the spread of the Theosophical Society to every corner of the globe, and his administrative responsibilities continued unabated. He traveled and lectured; sought to bring together factions of the world Buddhist community, and encouraged people to study their own religions and find the ancient truths hidden under orthodoxy and modern ignorance.

Because of controversies with Blavatsky and Judge, Olcott's limitations have often been emphasized, but he was defended repeatedly by Blavatsky and the Masters. In her defense of Olcott in 1889, Blavatsky stated that "Wherever he will be, there will be the TS so long as he lives; those who want me, must have him, . . ." His energy, abilities, and self-sacrifice allowed the modern Theosophical Society to come into being as an organization.

After a fall while traveling in the autumn of 1906, Olcott returned to India in December. He was diagnosed with serious heart trouble, from which he died on February 17, 1907. His last message on February 2, 1907, reads:

To my beloved brethren in the physical body: I bid you farewell. In memory of me, carry on the grand work of proclaiming and living the Brotherhood of Religions.

To my beloved Brothers on the higher planes: I greet and come to you, and implore you to help me to impress on all men on earth that 'there is no religion higher than Truth,' and that in the Brotherhood of Religions lies the peace and progress of humanity.

[S.B.D.](#)

© Copyright by the Theosophical Publishing House, Manila